

JEROME, WHO MOVED AWAY

Whenever I felt lonely as a kid I'd sometimes go to the underpass, a street built under the railroad tracks with a passageway for people walking. It was dark and damp, always cooler than it was anyplace else, even along the river. I found other people there, kids my age smoking cigarettes; I did too, older people sometimes watching us intently. Interesting things were on the walls. Cars would whoosh by, and it was fun to listen to the clomp of people walking and the footsteps echoing along the dim gray corridor. I'd stay down there as long as it took for at least one train to rumble by above me, leaning back against the wall feeling the whole world move. Footsteps echoed going away. I wonder where you are today.

THE BLACK BRIDGE

-- in memorium, Julius Bullinger, 1882-1950

Walked out to the Black Bridge this afternoon, snow three hours before had left the ground and trees covered in white clumps and curves, grey branches of elm and cottonwood clacking their foreign tongue in that bitter winter wind I've long since gone away from. This great big red retriever, a neighbor's dog, accompanied me out and back, finding on the way the spine of someone's recent kill, white-tail deer most likely. Ran into a young fellow taking back two buckets full of sand for his driveway; his car got stuck "and she ain't goin' no further."

When I was eight years old I ran away, after fighting another losing battle with my older brother. Wasn't sure exactly where I was going to end, but I knew I had to get away from arguments and shouting, even belts and sticks and clenched fists raining down blows on my questioning head. Not that I wasn't guilty of anything; I had my share.

But that day I had enough of losing and went away, determined never to see any of them again. There was only one person I'd have gone to, then, and that was Grandpa, but he was sick and in the hospital where I couldn't go; Grandma said he'd be home any day now. And so without anyone to go to, without hope, without Grandpa, I struck off south.

After miles in the snow and cold wind I came to the Black Bridge, without knowing exactly where I was, remembering only I had been here before. Starting to cross, I found the space between the railroad ties too large, the

distance down too great for my great fear of falling down to the ice below covering the Heart River, imagining my small body smashing through the ice and lost forever. Crossing a dozen ties or so, I froze, couldn't go further, afraid to turn around and go back, go back to the town and the fighting there. I didn't know what to do, didn't know where I was, but knew I wasn't lost. I just had to get out of there, off of that damn bridge, across it, into the inviting woods across the river where the railroad tracks went straight, without a curve, and disappeared somewhere out beyond the other side of the forest. I knew if I could get across I'd never have to come back, they couldn't make me.

Frozen to the bridge, trying not to look down, but across instead, or back, I saw my Grandpa the other side of the bridge, a long way over and me just starting. How he got there I didn't know, he could do anything so it didn't surprise me at all, I was glad to see him. "C'mon!" he hollered, "C'mon, it's not so far and you're too big to fall through. One step at a time, go slow. I'll be over here, take your time."

And I began, but then the strangest thing ever in my life happened. Every step I took, Grandpa seemed to get lighter, or smaller or something; he was fading into the grey light of the woods and the white afternoon.

"Grandpa!" I shouted; "Grandpa, don't go away!"

"It's all right," he said; "I'll be here." But every slow step forward made him lighter, grey, until he was gone entirely. and I was left alone with the Black Bridge and all my fear of going down.

I turned around, and made it back to ground and solid, frozen snow. So that was that: He failed me too, and I was made a fool of, for good. I would not go back now under any circumstance. Determined, I headed east, away from home but in a different direction, towards another city and not into the forest, where the day by now was growing darker, where, had I gone, they would have found me sometime later, frozen.

They found me later, of course, eating cookies I bought from a store on the road five miles away. They took me home, and when I said Where's Grandpa, they told me he was dead.

It has taken me all these years to understand.

-- JKO

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